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Buddhism in Southernmost Maharashtra: The Brahmapuri Relic Coffer and Its Inscription

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Dedicated with deep respect and profound regret to the late Seishi Karashima.

Abstract:

In 1877, a large stone coffer was recovered from Brahmapuri, Maharashtra, India. It bears a short donative record in Brāhmī letters and is evidence for the presence of Buddhism at an early period in the southernmost tip of Maharashtra. The chest is now kept at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai. The inscription is one of the earliest written records of Maharashtra and the coffer is a rare example of a well-preserved stone relic chest.

Keywords:

Early Indian epigraphy, Buddhist relics, Buddhist relic containers, post-Asokan period, Sātavāhana period, Brahmapuri/Kolhapur (Maharashtra)

In 1877, a large stone coffer was recovered from Brahmapuri in the erstwhile Princely State of Kolhapur in Bombay Presidency, now a district in the state of Maharashtra. Col. F. Schneider, the Political Agent appointed by the British to ‘Kolhapur and Southern Marāthā’, wrote to John Jardine, Acting Secretary to the Government Bombay, and was instructed to send the artefacts to the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, which he did. The inscription was read by Bhagwanlal Indraji, and R.G. Bhandarkar presented a paper on the finds at the Society on 9 November, 1879. The report was published in the Society’s journal under the title ‘Memorandum on some Antiquarian Remains found in a Mound and in the Brahmapuri Hill, near Kolhāpur’.¹ The *Memorandum* included copies of correspondence between the parties concerned, sketches of the coffer and associated artefacts, and a plan of the find-spot. The published correspondence, dated from 16 to 29 November 1877, is between Schneider, Jardine, Mahādeo Wāsudeo Barve (State Kārbhāri, Kolhāpur), and C. Gonre, Secretary of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

The coffer, made of thick basalt slabs, measures 37 x 42 x 42 cm.² It was eventually

¹. JBBRAS, vol. 14 for 1878–1880, issue no. 36, Art. IX, pp. 147–154 plus plates. The report was reprinted in the *Collected Works of Sir R.G. Bandarkar*, vol. 3 (not seen). In citations I have converted the early diacritics to current ones, throughout: e.g. Kolhāpur to Kolhāpur, etc.

². In English, an object like this may be called a coffer, chest, box, or casket. *Coffer*, from Old French *coffre*, is defined as a ‘strongbox or small chest for holding valuables’ (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, edited by Judy Pearsall, Oxford University Press, [1998] 2001, p. 355). *Chest* and *box* are also suitable but they have wider semantic registers. In Buddhist studies *casket* is already the term of choice for small containers for relic

moved to the then Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, founded in 1905 but not inaugurated until 1922. In 1998 the museum was renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya ('Bombay' had become 'Mumbai' in 1995). The coffer remains in the Museum's storage to this day (Acc. No. S 69). Numerous reliquaries have been recovered from South Asian Buddhist sites over the last century and a half; regrettably, in most cases the sites were disturbed and we have little information about the disposition of the relics or the coffers that may have contained them. The coffer of the celebrated Piprahwa relics is on display at the Indian Museum, Kolkata; a stone relic box from Sanchi bearing a three-line Prakrit inscription on one face is kept in the British Museum.³

Discovery

I reproduce here portions of the letter sent by Mahādeo Wāsudeo Barve, State Kārbhāri, Kolhāpur, to Colonel F. Schneider, Political Agent, Kolhāpur and S.M. Country.⁴

Sir,—I have the honour to submit a short report on the discovery of a stone box bearing an inscription in the Māgadhi dialect, and holding in it a small casket made of a transparent stone, or crystal *sphatik*, in the Kharala Garden, situated on the eastern slope of the town of Kolhāpur.⁵ This interesting discovery took place on 27th October, 1877, under the following circumstances.

The ground about the little bungalow in the said garden is lately being put into order, and, to make the place even, extra earth was required for filling up the gaps which lay here and there. The convicts who were engaged in preparing the ground were ordered to take the earth for this purpose from a small piece of rising ground which stood uncultivated at the distance of about 250 yards to the east of the bungalow, and which was shaded with a *bābul*-tree grown over it. This rising ground was in the shape of a gently sloping irregular-shaped mound about eighty feet in diameter, its height nowhere exceeding seven or eight feet over the level of the adjoining fields. It was overgrown with grass, and appeared a proper place from whence to take supplies of earth required elsewhere. About a foot beneath the grassy surface the spade encountered a layer of burnt bricks, which excited curiosity. Nothing extraordinary was at first expected, as burnt bricks are often discovered in several places in and about the town, being the remnants of old brick clamps or mounds of ruined brick structure. In the course of digging, the convicts came to what appeared to be a block of stone, which they at once turned up by thrusting a crowbar under it. When it was extricated from the surrounding bricks it was found to be a box consisting of two pieces, one a hallow quadrangular stone trough of soft red laterite, as is found in the bed of the Panchagangā river here, holding a small transparent crystalline casket within, and the other a lid of the same stone exactly filling the mouth of the trough. But unfortunately the act of extrication proved so violent that before it was discovered to be a box the lid fell off, and the inside transparent casket was thrown out, which broke into two pieces. Its contents, if at all any, were evidently scattered about and lost, and escaped the sight of those present at the time. This circumstance was reported soon after, and I repaired to the spot and made the necessary inquiries.

deposits. In order to avoid confusion with the latter, I choose to use 'coffer' in the sense of a strongbox used to store relics, the most precious material goods of Buddhism.

³. Alexander Cunningham, *Bhilsa Topes*, pl. XX; Michael Willis, *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India*, London: British Museum Press, 2000, Cat. no. 2, p. 70, and figs. 52 and 53. The side depicted measures 28.4 x 13.3 x 4.4 cm. For the wide range of reliquaries, containers and their situation in the stūpas in which they were enshrined from the region of Sanchi alone, see the sketches in *Bhilsa Topes*, pls. XXII–XXX and the report by F.C. Maisey preserved in the British Library (Willis, Appendix 2, pp. 102–103).

⁴. *Memorandum*, pp. 148–149.

⁵. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term 'Māgadhi' was regularly used for Buddhist Prakrits including Pali. *Spatika* (Pali *phatika*) is the classical term for 'crystal'. Other reports describe the site as to the west of the city.

Some old letters were seen engraved on the inside of the lid, and a facsimile of the inscription was made and sent to Mr. Bhagavānlāl Pāṇḍit, of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bombay, who has considerable experience in deciphering old inscriptions.

From the characters employed, the inscription appears to be two thousand years old, or even older still, and seems to be a monument of the veneration in which the remains of Buddha were held by his followers long after the Nirvāṇa or decrease of their great founder.

It is indeed unfortunate that the contents of the ‘small transparent crystalline casket’ were lost. As Bhandarkar noted, the ‘stone box found at Kolhāpur contained a casket made of crystal. This casket must have contained a relic.’ The sketch of the coffer published with the *Memorandum* depicts a tiny casket at the bottom of the coffer, accompanied by three sketches in ‘full size’: a ‘plan of the lid or top of the casket’, a profile with measurements (‘elevation full size’), and a ‘bottom plan of the casket’. The reliquary, which measures 2 ½ [inches] across the lid, 2 7/8 [inches] across the bottom, and 1 1/5 [inches] in height is indeed small. Cracks are clearly depicted in the side and bottom views.⁶ The present whereabouts of the crystal casket are not known to me.

The inscription

The inside of the lid of the coffer bears a short donative record in Brāhmī letters that is one of the earliest written records of Maharashtra. It was published in the *Memorandum* in Devanagari letters as read by Bhagwanlal Indraji:

bramhasa dānam dharmaguttena kāritam.

The reading has evidently been somewhat normalised by the addition of the ‘ra’ in ‘brahma’ and ‘dharma’ and the gemination of ‘ta’ in ‘gutta’.⁷ An exact reading of the inscription, again by Bhagwanlal, was published in 1881 in *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India*. There it was published as if it had two lines.⁸

Bamhasa dānam.

Dhamagutena kārita.

Translation.

‘The gift of Bamha, made by Dhamaguta.’

The inscription is, however, in three lines:

1. *bamhasa danam*
2. *ritam*
3. *dhamagutena kā*

⁶. The squat cylindrical reliquary is indented around the middle. It somewhat resembles the short cylindrical reliquaries depicted in David Jongeward, Elizabeth Errington, Richard Salomon, and Stefan Baums, *Gandharan Buddhist Reliquaries* (*Gandharan Studies*, vol. 1), Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2012, pp. 268–269, figs. 170, 181, and 182 and pp. 288–89, figs. 350–351.

⁷. For Prakrit *bamha* = *brahma* see Richard Pischel, *A Grammar of the Prākrit Languages*, translated from German into English by Subhadra Jhā, Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1999, p. 331, § 402 and Madhukar Anant Mehendale, *Historical Grammar of Inscriptional Prakrits*, Pune: Deccan College Postgraduate Research Institute, [1948] 1997, 4.(ii), p. 134.

⁸. Tsukamoto presents it as if in two lines. Lüders only gives a translation with no indication of line breaks.

A single letter, evidently the vowel ‘a’, is inscribed on the lid and on the side.

Epigraphic puzzles

The inscription presents us with two epigraphic puzzles. Why is the vowel ‘a’ inscribed on two outer surfaces of the coffer? This seems to be unique and its meaning is a mystery. A possible parallel is the two relic caskets of Śākyamuni’s foremost disciples, Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, recovered by Alexander Cunningham at Sanchi stūpa 3 in 1851. Cunningham writes, ‘On the inner surface of the lid of each casket there is a single ink letter, half an inch in height. In Śāriputra’s casket the letter is *sā*, and in that of Maha Mogalana’s it is *ma*; these being the initial letter of their respective names.’⁹ These abbreviations are on the *inside* of the lid and they clearly relate to the saint whose relics are enshrined. But the Brahmapuri letters are on the *outside*, and their meaning as abbreviations is not transparent. Can they simply be alignment markers, to show how the lid is to be placed in on the coffer?¹⁰

Even more baffling is the question: why is the last phrase engraved in such wise that the final two syllables are placed at the beginning of the second line, *before* the phrase to which they belong, which *follows* in the third line? Does this curiosity of spelling and formatting point to a disconnect between the written exemplar, if there was one, or the oral recitation, if such was the case, and the engraver? Could it be that the engraver, presumably a stonemason, was unaccustomed to the practice of writing? I am unable to solve these puzzles.

Publication and research

The publication of the inscription exemplifies collaboration among early Indian scholars, starting with Bhagwanlal Indraji (1839–1888) and Sir R.G. Bhandarkar (1837–1925) and then Scottish scholar James Burgess (1832–1916, founder of *The Indian Antiquary* in 1872).¹¹ The later exploration and excavation of the mound on the west bank of the Pañcaganga river was inspired by local scholar Prof. Kundangar of Rajaram College, Kolhapur, and taken up in earnest by archaeologists H.D. Sankalia and M.G. Dikshit of the Deccan College in 1945–46. Karl Khandalavala published a masterful study of the artefacts discovered by Kundangar in *Lalit Kalā*. This long trajectory of Indian archaeology spanned the colonial to the independent periods of Indian history and was facilitated and supported by the erstwhile princely states¹² and colonial and post-colonial institutions including the Asiatic Society and the Deccan College.

The inscription was first published in the *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* and next, as ‘Inscription from Kolhapur’ in *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India*—both within a few years of the discovery. The latter was prefaced by a short note:¹³

⁹. Cunningham, *Bhilsa Topes*, p. 299. For F.C. Maisey’s report preserved in the British Library, see Willis, *Buddhist Reliquaries*, p. 102.

¹⁰. I thank Prof. Kengo Harimoto for this suggestion (23 February, 2020).

¹¹. For Bhagwanlal Indraji, see Virchand Dharamsey, *Bhagwanlal Indraji the First Indian Archaeologist: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Study of the Past*, Vadodara: Darshak Itihas Nidhi, 2012. For Burgess, see Upinder Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, pp. 188–199.

¹². For archaeology in the princely states, see Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*, pp. 292–304.

¹³. James Burgess and Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraji, *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India with*

In making some excavations about two years ago at Kolhāpur, the foundations of a large Stūpa were turned up, and in the centre of it was found a square stone box containing a rock-crystal box, or relic-casket. On the square lid of the stone box was cut in pure Maurya or Aśōka characters an inscription [...], while on the side of the box was the letter *A*.

H. Lüders did not fail to include the Brahmapuri inscription in his celebrated ‘List of Brāhmī Inscriptions’; neither did Tsukamoto omit it in his *Comprehensive Study of the Indian Buddhist Inscriptions*.¹⁴ It remains quietly in the archive but is otherwise neglected.

Date

As is usually the case, scholars have assigned different dates to the undated record. Burgess and Indraji describe the letters as ‘pure Maurya or Aśōka characters’. Some place it in the third to first centuries BCE; in the memorandum Bhandarkar (p. 153) dates it to the first to second century CE:

The characters on the lid of the casket-receptacle are older than those of the time of the later Āndhrabhrityas, and are to be referred to the first or second century of the Christian era.

Bhandarkar’s estimate is surely too late. Manjiri Bhalerao suggests the first century BCE.¹⁵

The site

Brahmapuri is on the banks of the Panchaganga river. The excavations by Sankalia and Dikshit showed that the area of the mound was an early Sātavāhana urban site, and, as P.S. Joshi writes, ‘The excavated remains of the Satavahana period revealed that this place was one of the largest of cities in Western India in the beginning of the Christian era’.¹⁶ Kolhapur was a transit station or entrepot on the Indo-Roman trade routes; it was on a major ancient route that ran north-south through Karad, Wai, Pune, Junnar and Nasik. Today National Highway 17 runs through Karad in Satara district, where there are a large clusters of Buddhist rock-cut architecture with a total of sixty-six caves, and Wai, in the same district, with eight or nine caves, through Satara city and on to Pune.¹⁷ From Pune, NH 3 runs further north through Junnar to Nashik, following old trade routes lined by Buddhist caves. In the southern sector, the ancient route was fed by the passages coming from Konkan; it also linked up with roads that connected major towns on the plateau like Ter, Nevosa and Paithan, and, in turn,

Descriptive Notes, &c. (Archaeological Survey of Western India), [1881] repr. Delhi: Indian India, 1976, p. 39 with plate.

¹⁴. H. Lüders, ‘Kolhāpur Buddhist relic box inscription’, ‘List of Brāhmī Inscriptions’, *Epigraphia Indica* X (1909–10), § 1185, p. 136; Keishō Tsukamoto, *Indo Bukkyō himei no kenkyū (A Comprehensive Study of Indian Buddhist Inscriptions)*, Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1996, vol. 1, III Kolhāpur 1, p. 470. The latter is reviewed by Gérard Fussman in *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 88 (2001), pp. 383–385.

¹⁵. Bhalerao, ‘Kolhapur Parisaratal Bauddha Dharmiya Puravashesh’, cited in Deglurkar et al. *Yugayugina Karavira*, p. 25.

¹⁶. P.S. Joshi, ‘Brahmapuri (Kolhapur)’, p. 223. For a general—and très colonial—description and history see *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series, Bombay Presidency*, ‘Kolhapur’, vol. 2, pp. 512–526.

¹⁷. For Karad, and Wai, see James Ferguson and James Burgess, *The Cave Temples of India*, [1880] repr. Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1969, pp. 211–217. For Wai, see M.K. Dhavalikar, *Late Hinayana Caves of Western India*, Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1984, pp. 33–35 and fig. 24. Other related caves might be Yerphal and Tamkane.

many other cities in the Peninsula and Northern India.¹⁸

The coffer and crystal reliquary retrieved in 1877 are not the only antiquities to have been found in the area. Only a few years earlier, in 1873, a hoard of coins was found. In 1945, a bronze hoard that included items of Indian and Roman/Alexandrian manufacture was excavated by the river. As summarized by Dhavalikar¹⁹:

Brahmapuri ... was formerly represented by a mound, but it is now [before publication in 2004] totally destroyed by the local people digging for earth. A small scale excavation was carried out in 1945 by Professor K.G. Kundangar of Rajaram College, Kolhapur. One evening he encountered two large metal pots containing a hoard of unique bronze objects which, on the basis of Dr. H.D. Sankalia's excavations later, showed that they all belong to the Satavahana period and can therefore be dated to the beginning centuries of the Christian era. They were found in a house which from the size of the bricks can be assigned to the Satavahana period.

The Roman antiquities included a statuette of Poseidon and Sātavāhana artefacts like an elephant with four riders on his back—both now celebrated as masterpieces of metal craftsmanship. The artefacts are now displayed in the Kolhapur Town-hall Museum.

The Kolhapur findings have not been integrated into the modern narrative history of Buddhism in India. The evidence points to a significant Buddhist presence with one or more structural reliquary stūpas dating to the early centuries BCE. About 15km northeast of Kolhapur is the Pohale cave complex, with a caitya cave and monastic residences.²⁰ We do not know the name of the large urban complex; we do not know the name of the stūpa(s) or supposed vihāras; we do not know the ancient names of the clusters of caves in the region or along the routes. Scholars have been unable to connect the sites in the area with those mentioned in the classical European records (*Ptolemy, Periplus*), in Xuanzang's seventh-century account, or in Buddhist literature: all of these have drawn a blank.

In the *Memorandum*, Bhandarkar writes (p. 153):

If excavations are made in other parts of the mound and the hill at Kolhāpur, and deeper diggings at the places where the relic-box and the copper vessel were found, I have little doubt that traces of ancient buildings and several interesting articles will be found.

Nearly a century and a half has passed since the first discoveries at Brahmapuri, and as

¹⁸. See S. Nagaraju, *Buddhist Architecture of Western India (c. 250 B.C.—c. A.D. 300)*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1981, pp. 10–12. For the routes see Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *The Ancient Routes of the Deccan and the Southern Peninsula*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2010, pp. 49–52. Like many other early sites, Kolhapur has a layered history leading through multiple cultural phases up to the present.

¹⁹. Dhavalikar, 'Brahmapuri Hoard', p. 91.

²⁰. Also known as Pohala or Pawala. For Pohale, see Nagaraju, *Buddhist Architecture of Western India*, pp. 281–283 and fig. 57, pl. 215; Dhavalikar, *Late Hinayana Caves*, p. 33 and fig. 23, and pl. XVIII; Y.S. Alone, *Buddhist Caves of Western India: Forms and Patronage*, New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2016, pp. 159–161.

elsewhere in India urbanization has expanded relentlessly. The mounds and former open spaces are now built up and encroached. The Brahmapuri relic coffer inscription is one of the earliest written records of Maharashtra, after the Asokan rock edicts from Sopara. As noted by Mangvungh, the Asokan edict and the Kolhapur inscription attest to ‘the presence of Buddhist communities in some parts of Western India, as early as the third century before Christ.’²¹ Despite the fact that nothing remains of the Buddhists foundations—Brahmapuri has become an ‘invisible site’ marked by memory, not monumental remains—it is important as one of the southernmost stations of Buddhism in Maharashtra. It counts among the major structural stūpas of the state, along with Pauni, Sopara, and Bhon. Further judicious investigation of the site and the finds will help us to understand the development of Buddhism in southern Maharashtra.

A chronology

- 1873. ‘Āndhrabṛtya coins’ published by Bhagwanlal.
- 27 Oct. 1877. Discovery of coffer on Brahmapuri hill.
- 22 Nov. 1877. Discovery of vessel on Brahmapuri hill.
- 9 Nov. 1878. Paper read by Barve at Royal Asiatic Society, Bombay.
- 1880. Publication of Barve’s *Memorandum* with inscription in JBBRAS, vol. 14 for 1878–1880, issue no. 36.
- 1881. Publication of inscription in Burgess and Indraji’s *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India with Descriptive Notes*.
- 1945. Discovery of 2 pots with artefacts by Prof. Kundangar.
- 1945–1946. Excavations by H.D. Sankalia and M.G. Dikshit.
- 1952. Publication of monograph on Brahmapuri Excavations by Sankalia and Dikshit.

This poem by Sir Richard Carnac Temple (1850–1931) was originally published as a preface to his ‘Fifty Years of The Indian Antiquary’, *The Indian Antiquary*, 1922. It symbolizes the quest of researchers like the late Seishi Karashima, and I publish it here as a tribute to his unflagging efforts and unwavering steadfastness.

We’ve struggled, you and I, for fifty years
To pierce the veil of mystery, that lies
On India’s past so heavily, and cries
Aloud for rending with the searcher’s shears.
We’ve sought and found no guerdon, but the fears
Unflagging effort brings to him that tries
And greatly longs, or joy when he espies
A little light that, dancing, laughs at tears.
No recompense in kind for you and me
Shall issue from the light our labours find
To guide the realm’s activities aright.
What of it? Is it not enough that we
Have won unwavering steadfastness of mind
To reach the day that waits upon the night.

²¹ Gindallian Mangvungh, *Buddhism in Western India*, Jodhpur: Kusumanjali Book World, 1996, p. 96.

Acknowledgements

Photos for figures 1–4, obtained in March 2017 and November 2019: Courtesy of the Trustees of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India), Mumbai. Not to be reproduced without prior permission of the Trustees.

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Abbreviation

JBBRAS *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*

Note The bibliography is far from comprehensive, being limited to sources immediately available to me. I have been unable to benefit from Marathi-language sources (such as Bhalerao or Deglurkar et al.).

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Peter Skilling, "Buddhism in Southernmost Maharashtra: The Brahmapuri Relic Coffer and Its Inscription."

PLATE 4

Fig. 1. General view of the casket. Note inscribed letter 'a' on left side of lid.



Fig. 2. General view of casket with lid opened.



Brahmapuri casket from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India. Basalt. Acc. No. S 69.

Photos for figures 1–4, obtained in March 2017 and November 2019; Courtesy of the Trustees of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India), Mumbai.

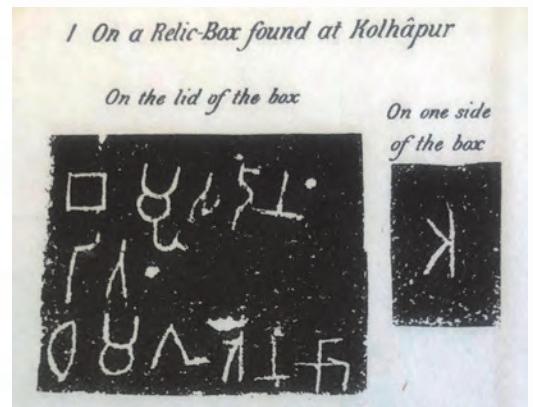
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Fig. 3. Casket with lid removed, showing inscription.



Fig. 4. Donative record in Brāhmī letters.

Fig. 5. Rubbing (from James Burgess and Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraji, *Inscriptions from the Cave-Temples of Western India with Descriptive Notes, &c.*, (Archaeological Survey of Western India), [1881] repr. Delhi: Indian India, 1976. Unnumbered plate.)



Brahmapuri casket from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India. Basalt. Acc. No. S 69.

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PLATE 6

Fig. 6. Plate from *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Asiatic Society*, vol. 14 for 1878–1880, issue no. 36, Art. IX, pp. 147–154.

